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# **Transcultural engagement with Polish memory of the Holocaust while watching Leszek Wosiewicz's *Kornblumenblau***

By Victoria Grace Walden

## **Abstract**

*Kornblumenblau* (Leszek Wosiewicz 1989) is a film that explores the experience of a Polish political prisoner interned at Auschwitz I. It particularly foregrounds issues related to Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust in its diegesis. Holocaust films are often discussed in relation to representation and the cultural specificity of their production context. However, this paper suggests thinking about film and topographies, the theme of this issue, not in relation to where a work is produced but in regards to the spectatorial space. It adopts a phenomenological approach to consider how, despite *Kornblumenblau's* particularly Polish themes, it might address the transcultural spectator and draw attention to the broader difficulties one faces when attempting to remember the Holocaust. Influenced particularly by the writing of Jennifer M. Barker and Laura U. Marks, this paper suggests that film possesses a body — a display of intentionality, beyond those presented within the diegesis, which engages in dialogue with the spectator. During the experience of viewing *Kornblumenblau*, this filmic corporeality draws attention to the difficulties of confronting the Holocaust in particularly haptic ways, as the film points to the unreliability of visual historical sources, relates abject sensations to concentrationary spaces and breaks down as it confronts the scene of the gas chamber.

## **Introduction**

Thinking about this issue's theme, “tracing topographies” in relation to Holocaust film might suggest a review of screen representations of specific historical sites, such as Auschwitz or Majdanek, or a survey of a particular nation's engagement with Holocaust history as has been fashionable in a range of disciplines.<sup>1</sup> However, the spectatorial space is one that has been much neglected in discourse about Holocaust film, despite its vital significance to the film experience. Films play a significant role in constructing Holocaust memory, evidenced, for example, by the impact of *Schindler's List* (USA, 1993).<sup>2</sup> However, little attention has been given to the ways in which films engage spectators with this past during the screening and the significance of the viewing space to the meaning attributed to the experience of watching a Holocaust film. From Edward W. Soja's writing about thirdspace to Henri Lefebvre's Marxist-phenomenological and Doreen Massey's geographical work, many scholars consider space to be fluid and defined by the elements that meet within it.<sup>3</sup> This article extends this idea phenomenologically, particularly thinking through the work of Jennifer M. Barker and Laura U.

Marks to argue that the viewing space is defined by a fleshy encounter between spectator and film bodies.<sup>4</sup> It is these bodies in dialogue that, I argue, help define the meaning (both corporeal and intellectual) of the cinematic space and enable a transcultural engagement with Holocaust memory.

Using the Polish film *Kornblumenblau* (1989) as an example, I examine how such a historical-realist film seemingly rooted in particular national concerns enables a transcultural engagement with the complexities of Holocaust memory through the spectator's mimetic relationship with the film body.<sup>5</sup> While the film exposes a particularly Polish memory of this past, I suggest that turning to a phenomenological reading enables one to understand the film's potential transcultural significance and begins to explain how the spectator engages with Holocaust memory as they watch the film.

While much has been written about the types of Holocaust films produced by particular countries, there has been a turn in recent years, influenced by the work of Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, toward thinking about Holocaust memory on transnational terms.<sup>6</sup> Levy and Sznaider suggest that in the age of globalization, “alongside nationally bounded memories a new form of memory emerges [ ... ] ‘cosmopolitan memory’.”<sup>7</sup> This new type of memory, they argue, acknowledges the significance of global concerns to local communities, transcending the specifics of national or ethnic boundaries.<sup>8</sup> Valentina Glajar acknowledges the negotiation of transnational and national concerns regarding Holocaust memory in the Romanian context, an issue relevant beyond this particular country.<sup>9</sup> I prefer the term “transcultural” to acknowledge that it is not only national boundaries that the cinematic encounter of watching *Kornblumenblau* transcends, but other identity values too.

Levy and Sznaider's argument suggests that thinking about *Kornblumenblau* only in terms of its distinct Polishness negates its potential resonance beyond its country of origin. Focusing on the viewing space rather than place of production of the film enables one to consider this potential wider significance. A close study of the film body and the spectator's engagement with it in the viewing space, rather than solely focusing on its national and representational value, reveals that this filmic body is in tension with the images it presents, highlighting the many difficulties that characterize any attempt to remember the Holocaust, particularly for those who did not experience it first-hand (as most spectators and films did not). The spectator is invited to mimetically engage with this complexity during the film experience.

Film phenomenology – the study of the viewing experience and materiality – is particularly interested in the film body. This “body” is not understood as one particular physical site; to describe either camera or projector as such is quite inadequate. Rather, it is implied through the film's revelation of its intentionality – its temporal and spatial movement expressed diegetically, subjectively (the term Vivian Sobchack uses to refer to camera motion), optically and cinematically (through the edit). All of these types of movement express the

direction of the film's consciousness (its phenomenological intentionality).<sup>10</sup> While it may seem peculiar to suggest film possesses “consciousness,” this is understood in terms of its ability to experience spatiality and temporality, rather than a spiritual or psychic sense of being. Alongside film phenomenology, thing theory and object-orientated ontology have, in recent years, drawn attention to the significance of non-human ways of being and highlighted the relevance of non-anthropocentric ways of thinking about the lived-world.<sup>11</sup> None of these approaches assume things can experience the world like humans, but consider the different engagements with the world they might offer through their material specificity. Thinking about a film “body” then means thinking about how film perceives and expresses the world, or in the case of *Kornblumenblau*, how it attempts to remember the Holocaust.

### **Kornblumenblau and Polish Holocaust memory**

Before continuing with my argument, it is useful to explain how *Kornblumenblau* might be perceived as specifically Polish in relation to the Holocaust memory with which it engages. The film explores Tadeusz Wyczyński's experience at Auschwitz I. The Polish musician almost dies after being injected with typhus in the infirmary. Desperate to survive, he is saved by a Kapo who appreciates his musical talent. This enables Tadeusz to work through the camp's ranks, from potato peeler to waiter, then musician in the camp orchestra. At the film's climax, Tadeusz pretends to play the tuba at an SS festival; elsewhere victims are herded into a gas chamber. The performance is interrupted by an air strike that liberates prisoners. Though loosely based on the testimony of Kazimierz

Tyminski, *Kornblumenblau* clearly exhibits fantastical elements.<sup>12</sup> It condenses Tyminski's experiences of Auschwitz and Buchenwald into the one synecdochical site and fabricates a Soviet salvation (when in reality the majority of inmates had been evacuated on “death marches” by the time troops arrived). *Kornblumenblau* is a productive example to use for this investigation because it particularly foregrounds issues relevant to Polish memory of the Holocaust, but, as I will argue, also has the potential to engage the spectator with more general, transculturally relatable difficulties one encounters when confronting this past.

To some extent, *Kornblumenblau* attempts to portray a photo-realist, historical image of Auschwitz. It was filmed at the former sites of Auschwitz and Majdanek, and the props, costumes, and decor simulate an “authentic” representation of a functioning concentration camp. It was shot on film, in color and black-and-white, the latter giving certain sequences a particularly archival aesthetic. The film has had a limited release beyond Poland. Today, the non-Polish spectator is most likely to discover it on YouTube where digital compression offers a further distancing effect, not only between the spectator and a past that looks archival, but also between the present of the viewing

experience and the time of production, as analog film is distorted by the digital signal.

Marek Haltof considers *Kornblumenblau* within the context of Polish Holocaust cinema, noting that it is illustrative of the renewed interest in Polish-Jewish relations after the release of *Shoah* (France and UK, 1985) and Jan Błonski's controversial publication "The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto" in 1987.<sup>13</sup> Haltof positions *Kornblumenblau* within the first major wave of second-generation films – those produced by film-makers who did not experience the Holocaust.<sup>14</sup> The film expresses a particularly Polish memory of the Holocaust in many ways. It is based at Auschwitz and adapts a Polish survivor's testimony, whose name is interestingly changed from Kazimierz – a particularly poignant name in the history of Poland<sup>15</sup> – to Tadeusz, reminiscent both of Polish survivor Tadeusz Borowski's particularly macabre writing, thus hinting at the film's dark tone (as suggested by Haltof), and national poet Adam Mickiewicz's 1843 epic poem "Pan Tadeusz," which offers one of the earliest positive representations of the Jew in Polish culture.<sup>16</sup> The different name offers a subtle but significant change, implying that Jewishness is fundamental to Polish culture, rather than separate from it.

Furthermore, the film's protagonist is a witness-victim, as were many Polish people; he is persecuted by the Nazis and witness to the Jewish Holocaust. While there has been much debate in Poland regarding the so-called "hierarchy of suffering" between Poles and Jews, *Kornblumenblau* expresses the two traumatic narratives simultaneously, albeit from a Polish point of view, thus the Jewish experience is marginalized.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the film engages with archive material, a trope of Polish Holocaust film.<sup>18</sup> However, unlike other films that use this technique to represent the missing Jewish culture, *Kornblumenblau* manipulates the archival image in ways that suggest unease about film's ability to portray an objective, official history of the Holocaust, as will be discussed in more detail later. Like the other films, however, this too points to the country's missing Jewish population.

While an understanding of the film's cultural context is useful, it is important not to forget the international dimension of film production. Many of the films Haltof discusses in his survey of Polish Holocaust film are co-productions involving foreign companies (though *Kornblumenblau* is distinctively Polish). Furthermore, one must consider the transcultural composition of film audiences. While specifically Polish themes are foregrounded in *Kornblumenblau*, it can enable the spectator, Polish or otherwise, to reflect on their knowledge and engagement with the Holocaust and negotiate with the film, even if it may challenge their preconceptions. Nationally focused studies underplay the significance of this dialogue between film and spectator, and thus do not fully consider the implications of this relationship and the potential for the experience to inform an act of "bearing witness" to the Holocaust, understood here not in relation to seeing this event first-hand, but in terms of later "witnesses" engaging with the past through mediated means.<sup>19</sup>



## Watching Kornblumenblau as transcultural experience

My proposal in this article is that adopting a phenomenological reading of *Kornblumenblau* highlights its transcultural relevance to Holocaust memory. The Holocaust has long been considered of transnational import. In their work about transnational memory, Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney consider the Holocaust “a moral benchmark in a new world order,” echoing Levy and Sznajder’s idea of a “global memory imperative” in relation to the Holocaust.<sup>20</sup> Holocaust memory is informed by international committees such as the International Holocaust Research Alliance (IHRA); its victims were born in, transported to, and survivors emigrated to a range of different countries; Auschwitz, a Nazi German camp in what is once again Polish land, had an international mix of inmates and is now a site of transcultural learning and memorialization, with visitors from a wide range of countries remembering victims who were imprisoned based on a range of national, sexual, cultural, or religious identifiers. However, the Holocaust has also been integrated into national myths by countries both directly and not directly affected by it. The transcultural dimensions of the film experience are particularly apt for engaging with the multifaceted issues of Holocaust memory.

The transnational in relation to film studies has generally been used to refer to particular texts that engage with journeys across borders, such as stories about Diaspora, or international co-productions, rather than spectatorial experience.<sup>21</sup> In film studies, “the spectator” has generally been considered an abstract term. In this sense, it does not refer to a specific individual, but rather considers the presence of a body with which the film communicates or engages. Spectator studies tend to think about how a film suggests a particular reading. Feminist approaches, among others, have stipulated a certain kind of body, but, as bell hooks’s work on black female spectators suggests, this denies the many identities that formulate a body, including, but not limited to, class, gender, age, disability, nationality, and ethnicity.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the spectatorial body might always be considered transcultural in its negotiation of different identities.

Phenomenologists, with their focus on experience, seem to acknowledge the transcultural potential of bodies. Beyond film studies, Emmanuel Levinas points to the significance of the Other – a body that is not ours, and is potentially dissimilar from our own – in shaping our ethical responsibility.<sup>23</sup> In Marks’s understanding of mimesis in the cinematic experience, she argues that what she calls “intercultural spectatorship ... is the meeting of two different sensoria, which may or may not intersect. Spectatorship is thus an act of sensory translation of cultural knowledge.”<sup>24</sup> Marks argues that the cinematic experience is deeply sensuous and engages taste, touch, and smell, as well as sight and hearing, and that sensual experience is culturally learned. For Marks, then, the spectator can mimetically engage with film on a haptic level and in doing so they are able to exchange cultural knowledge: to get closer to memories they have not experienced in the lived-world. Marks’s work, which

negotiates Deleuzian philosophy and phenomenology, suggests that mimesis is related to the spectator's experience with the film rather than any potential realism claim of the image. She differentiates haptic looking from optical thus:

Optical visibility depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object. Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than plunge into illusionary depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze.<sup>25</sup>

Marks suggests that spectators can mimetically engage with a film by grazing over such images. While the majority of her work emphasizes diegetic images that provoke sensations of touch, for example close-ups of fabric or pouring water, her theory can also be applied to the movement and materiality of the film body itself (as she suggests in her later work).<sup>26</sup> Following Marks, I argue that by mimetically engaging with the textural surfaces and intentionality of the film, the spectator watching *Kornblumenblau* can relate to the way in which the film grapples with an attempt to remember the Holocaust.

Despite its dominant historical-realist style, *Kornblumenblau* draws attention to the film body on many occasions, most strikingly with its pseudo-archival imagery, use of color and sound, and a gas chamber sequence in which the film seems to literally break down. Expanding on the phenomenological work of Marks and Sobchack, Barker draws attention to the specificity of film materiality, suggesting that the medium has a “skin,” “viscera,” and “musculature” – terms she applies phenomenologically, rather than biologically, to refer to the film's experience of materiality, temporality, and spatiality.<sup>27</sup> Three particularly striking revelations of the film body in *Kornblumenblau* are the opening pseudo-archive sequence, in which it foregrounds a particular material skin and a relationship with temporality and spatiality reminiscent of early cinema; affectively charged use of sound and color which at times seems to break the film's historical-realist verisimilitude; and the gas chamber sequence in which the combination of diegetic, subjective, and cinematic movement culminates in an expression of corporeal breaking down. These particular sequences encourage the spectator to engage with the complexities of Holocaust memory revealing a material pastness, repulsion of concentration camp violence, and the corporeal difficulty of confronting the gas chamber – issues with transcultural resonance beyond the specificity of Polish Holocaust memory. Following Marks's suggestion that the engagement between spectator and film bodies is a mimetic encounter, we can see that the spectator of *Kornblumenblau* confronts the complexities of Holocaust memory through an engagement with a foreign non-human body, that of the film.

The experience of engaging with *Kornblumenblau* is transcultural on several levels then: firstly, it is a Polish film available beyond the nation's borders; secondly, the spectator is always negotiating with their own plurality of

identities alongside those shared by the film; thirdly, it offers an encounter between Polish (on screen) and potentially non-Polish bodies (viewing the film); and finally, it presents an encounter between a foreign, non-human body (the film) and the spectator. The following analysis focuses on the relationship between film and spectatorial bodies in order to explore how transcultural concerns about Holocaust memory can be translated during the viewing experience.

I work through the corporeal layers of the filmic body to excavate how this fleshly encounter points to potentially transcultural Holocaust memory issues, but without ignoring the film's national significance (for this does not disappear as soon as we begin to think on transcultural levels; rather nationality is one of its many features).

### **Archival skin**

*Kornblumenblau* opens with a black-and-white semi-archival sequence of pre-war Poland. Several Polish fiction films about the Holocaust use archive images to represent the Jewish experience as if attempting to fill in the gap left by an absent culture. However, the opening sequence of *Kornblumenblau* challenges such portrayals by interrogating the archive and drawing attention to its gaps. In doing so, the sequence reveals a tension between the absent and present, fiction and history, while evoking sensations of loss and critiquing official history.

The sequence embeds Tadeusz's developmental years, from birth to marriage, within the history of Poland: from the Prussian Empire, represented by processions at Brandenburg Tor, Berlin; through the factory lines of industrialization; war (expressed through fiction footage, interestingly including Sergei M. Eisenstein's *Strike* [Soviet Union, 1925] and *October* [Soviet Union, 1928]); the decadence of independent Poland to Nazi occupation. While some footage seems archival, some is ambiguous, and some clearly staged as Adam Kamień, who plays Tadeusz, performs as the protagonist and his father. The staged scenes mimic the speed, color, and materiality of the archival film. Thus it is difficult for the spectator to differentiate between “real” archive and fiction images. This is further complicated by the old fictional footage.

A tension between the present and absent emerges as the sequence expresses a non-Jewish Poland. A specific “Polishness” is emphasized through snippets of the national anthem in the title cards, and the image of Father Christmas (hinting to a Christian culture); there are no prominent signs of Jewishness, despite the country's prevalent, particularly Orthodox, Jewish population in the 1930s. The speed and texture of the archival-like footage invites the spectator to feel a sensation of the past and to mimetically engage with the film's way of remembering it. However, they cannot feel a sensation of closeness with the country's pre-war Jewish culture because it is absent.



While this sequence does not explicitly draw attention to Jews, the contemporary spectator, in particular, will notice this aberration, which is reinforced by Tadeusz's witnessing of Jewish culture later in the film – a violinist whom he hears from a distance and a ballerina he sees dancing in slow motion in an image defined by a de-saturated palette, itself somewhat reminiscent of the archive here. The similarity of the ballerina scene to the pseudo-archival sequence draws the spectator's attention back to these opening images of Poland, from which Jews are missing. Thus, Jews are only traces; they have disappeared from the official narrative (particularly true during Soviet times). The detached, later image of the female Jew evokes sensations of loss.

These sensations provoked by archival materiality can encourage the spectator to identify with those absent from the image and sidelined in official history and memory, as well as those present. Thus, attention is drawn to the gaps in the archive, rather than the archive “filling in” for a missing culture, as it seems to in other Polish films. The fakedness of the opening sequence draws attention to the instability of the archive as an authority on the past and thus subtly draws attention to the history it does not tell, that of Poland's Jewish community. Jews are not only missing from official archives by the time of the film's production, but due to the Holocaust and postwar anti-Semitism, they were physically missing from the majority of Poland. The sequence questions the reliability of the archival texture as a stable material through which to fully access the past. The fakedness and lacunae that characterize the opening montage suggest the archive offers only a construction of memory. This instability of memory is transculturally relatable.

In recent years the concept of the “missing Jew” has become a symbol of remembrance in Poland, for example Israeli artist Ronen Eidelman's photographic installation “Coming Out in Lublin,” in which he places images of the city's missing Jews on building exteriors; the project “Tęsknię za tobą Żydzie” (“I Miss You Jew”) by Polish artist Rafał Betlejewski, in which the title statement is spray-painted in Polish streets; and Gordzka Gate's “Mysteries of Memory” installation – a single street lamp that continuously shines in the old Jewish district of Lublin. The opening of *Kornblumenblau* encourages the modern spectator, aware of the larger discourse about remembering Jewishness in Poland, to adopt a critical position and to reflect on the film's corporeal vulnerability as it attempts to remember this past through a pseudo-archival narrativization.

The absent Jew becomes prominent retrospectively as the film progresses. Read in dialogue with the archival-like image of the Jewish ballerina, the opening reveals distrust on the part of the film, of its own ability to recall and remember the past accurately and appropriately through the memory images of its archive. Furthermore, the archive is explicitly related to memory later in the film when Tadeusz reminisces about pre-war Poland and dreams in archival images. By mimetically engaging with these sequences, the spectator

is encouraged to reflect upon the difficulties of confronting Holocaust memory. Thus they are encouraged to consider whether any official history or memory of the Holocaust is necessarily the only one and whether archive images really offer the closeness to the past their obvious aged tactility suggests. Therefore issues that might seem specifically Polish – the disputes about the hierarchy of suffering between Polish and Jewish victims – have transcultural affect here as the film encourages the spectator to reconsider their relationship with any history of the Holocaust with which they are familiar. Jewish people and culture, after all, became “missing” from many locations beyond Poland.

While Marks refers particularly to experimental cinemas when she states that “unrepresentable memories [for her, this includes stories of Diasporic trauma and the Holocaust] find their expression in [its] ... characteristic gaps,” this can also be related to the opening sequence of *Kornblumenblau*.<sup>28</sup> Missing memories are exposed through the archival skin of this Polish imagining of the past and its juxtaposition of fiction and archival imagery (both historical and fictional) that destabilizes the authority and truth value of the archive and thus encourages the spectator to attend to the lacunae of the images, reminding them that memory is characterized by incompleteness, a feature particularly prominent in Holocaust memory when so many victims died, unable to share their stories.<sup>29</sup> Coming into contact with images of the past, the film's opening archival skin then draws attention not only to the Jew missing in Polish memory of the Holocaust, but encourages the spectator to reflect on what is absent from their own landscape, communities, cultures, and their knowledge of this complex past: the images that are materially out of reach.

The pronounced archival materiality of the opening encourages a haptic relationship with the image: its graininess, fadedness, black-and-white color and slow speed draw attention to its pastness as it expresses a decaying image (for such film did not seem grainy and faded to its original viewers). While the footage appears to offer an interaction with the historical as the past seems to become present before us, it also reveals its distance from the spectator's time because of its material “damage” (however fake this might be in this particular example). In *Kornblumenblau*, the spectatorial relationship with the past is complicated by the foregrounding of tensions between the absent and the present, and the “real” and fiction, emphasizing the instability of memory. Archival moving images are a particularly filmic form of memory, or history, thus these tensions reveal the film's distrust in its own particular way of engaging with the past. It encourages the mimetic spectator to critique histories of the Holocaust they know and offers a tool for exploring its supposed unrepresentability, to find another, haptic way of connecting with this past.

Marks considers vision to dominate historical discourse, while alternative memories are often evoked through other senses as a reaction against official narratives.<sup>30</sup> For her, memory of the unrepresentable (or unrepresented because it is missing from official archives) emerges from haptic images

because they attempt to critique official ways of expressing the past. Thus, one might consider films that underplay the privileging of vision and the symbolic to highlight the complexity of memories (by revealing other stories) of the past, not only in terms of their content and point of view, but also in their approach to remembering. It is particularly interesting that Marks considers such memories to be those that are “unrepresentable,” a term often used to describe the Holocaust.

Following this thinking suggests that *Kornblumenblau*’s opening sequence, which draws attention to an archival materiality and temporality, and in doing so encourages the spectator to graze the image rather than solely gaze at it, emphasizes not only its lacunae, and therefore the complexities of memory (there is not one dominant narrative of the past, but rather a wide range of stories), but also the ability we have to confront the past in multisensory ways, through our skin, viscera, and musculature, challenging the dominance of vision and the symbolic. This haptic relationship with images invites the spectator to acknowledge the diverse, transcultural dimensions of Holocaust memory and encourages them to challenge official ways of engaging with the past within their own cultural context and beyond.

### **Beneath the skin**

Barker suggests that “touch is not just skin-deep but is experienced at the body’s surface, in its depths and everywhere in between ... touch is a ‘style of being’” and *Kornblumenblau* offers haptic encounters that resonate deep within the viscera.<sup>31</sup> There are moments in the film when color overlays cover the screen and sound seems unsynchronized with the image. Such qualities announce the material presence of the film’s body. Such moments reveal the tension between the film’s images of Auschwitz and the body of the film grappling with this complex past; they interrupt the historical-realist verisimilitude foregrounding the film’s corporeality, evidencing an uneasy relationship between the remembered past and the affect of memory. Barker notes that generally the film body is rarely visible, but in some instances it is “explicitly announced” through certain movements or material qualities.<sup>32</sup> These moments in *Kornblumenblau* create startling affect and encourage reflection on the ability to remember the Holocaust.

*Kornblumenblau* is mostly in color; however, its dominant gray and brown tones create a de-saturated feel. Even the blue stripes on the victims’ uniforms look faded. Thus, the film expresses a somewhat historical aesthetic. Sepia, black-and-white, and de-saturated tones are often used in film to express the fadedness of the past, which now only appears to the spectator as a trace of its former self. Color and black-and-white are often understood as representing a “now” and a “then” respectively, a technique often used in Holocaust films.<sup>33</sup> *Kornblumenblau* too uses black-and-white and color, though interestingly, as previously noted, the former expresses unstable memories of pre-war life, rather than somehow authenticating the film’s relationship with a

real past. The film's color sequences are denoted by a de-saturated palette, reflecting a horizon dimmer than the spectator's lived-world. Such an aesthetic might be considered particularly appropriate for expressing traumatic pasts distinguished as specifically different types of experiences from modern quotidian life.

However, the film's historically suggestive palette is invaded by moments of vivid red which are deeply affective. Like Steven Spielberg's infamous girl in the red coat, the use of color in such instances in *Kornblumenblau* could be read in terms of its narrative function: evoking a foreboding sense of death. However, its powerful resonance, as in Spielberg's film, suggests it has strong affective, as well as representational, significance. While color is often considered to heighten realism, before color celluloid became standard early films often used color tinting for quite different purposes.<sup>34</sup> It would be difficult to assume that the lurid, vivid colors used in films such as *Annabelle Serpentine Dance* (USA, 1895) or *Joan the Woman* (USA, 1916), for example, pertain to realism.

Though some early film-makers attempted to create more “realist” images using color, during the first few decades of cinema it was more often used to provoke affective response in the spectator. *Kornblumenblau* introduces redness in a similar manner to these early films. The film's overlay of color does not belong to the verisimilitude, in fact it disturbs and interrupts historical realism. Yet it establishes a certain mood and provokes particular sensations. It is significant that the film occasionally returns to a coloring technique particularly prevalent in early cinema: as with the slowed speed of the opening pseudo-archive sequence, once again the film body recalls a specifically cinematic sense of pastness, negotiating between a screen representation of the Holocaust and the affect remembering it cinematically has on the film body.

In *Kornblumenblau*, red tinting is prevalent during sequences in the barracks and prison cells where it is often accompanied by a monotonous chorus of moaning. These scenes create a sensory overload; there is an excess of information attacking the spectator's sensory organs: too much color, too much sound, which accompany an image of human bodies claustrophobically crammed into spaces. The color and sound foreground the filmic body's attempt to remember these sites that were inhumane; places of death as much as sleep. The filmic body's expression in *Kornblumenblau*, which seems to spew color and sound (and I purposefully use the analogy with vomiting here), provides moments of sensorial excess. They draw attention to the difficulty of comprehending the affect of inhumane conditions upon the material body. They have the potential to make one feel physically sick. As the film's material excess is exposed, the spectator can mimetically engage with it, experiencing sensations of the abject deep within their viscera. Mimetically engaging with the tension between different filmic elements here provokes sensations of bodily excess for the spectator, who can feel this in the tension

of their own muscles, in the depths of their gut, and on the surface of their skin.

For Julia Kristeva, the abject is that which is of the body, yet opposed to it. It reveals the fragile limitations of the body and expresses itself in substances such as vomit, phlegm, and blood that the body wishes to expel. Though she writes from a psychoanalytical perspective, Kristeva's work has phenomenological potential because it considers abjection to be an excess of the body. She regularly refers to the body in her descriptions of abject experiences. For example, she states:

When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk – harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring – I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire.<sup>35</sup>

For Kristeva, abjection is felt not only on the surface of the body – the forehead and hands – but deep within its musculature and visceral recesses, as spasms, gagging, and shriveling organs. Thus the body is central to thinking about the abject.

As the filmic body in *Kornblumenblau* expels color and sounds, it reveals its difficulty in confronting Auschwitz – it expresses the abject affect of dealing with this particular traumatic memory as it pushes certain elements to the foreground, disturbing the illusion of a seamless diegetic world. Significantly, none of these moments refer specifically to the Jewish Holocaust. The red therefore emphasizes that the filmic body is beyond a particular cultural identity. Auschwitz after all would have impinged abjection on individuals from many different cultures, and is a site today that people, despite their origins, often feel pushes their minds and bodies beyond any experiential limits previously experienced. These color overlays in *Kornblumenblau* draw attention to an embodied memory of this site: a mediated layer placed over the image of the film's verisimilitude.

The appearance of these red overlays and sounds of nauseating moans not only enable the spectator to mimetically engage with the act of remembering; they lay bare the vulnerability of the film body as it tries to remember these past scenes of violation. It is common practice in narrative film-making to attempt to render the film body invisible, thus sound and image tend to complement each other to create a believable verisimilitude. The majority of *Kornblumenblau* complies with these expectations. However, the moments when red floods the screen and moans invade the soundscape reveal that another conscious, sensing body is present: a body trying to engage with the realist image on an affective level. It is a body that attempts to empathize with the historical narrative it constructs and in doing so expels excess, violently releasing it toward the spectator in a projectile attack on the senses. Mimetic



engagement allows the spectator to feel these sensations of abjection. We can all engage with these feelings of excess, whether we experienced Auschwitz or not. Such foregrounding of the film body is emphasized further in the film's gas chamber sequence.

## Confronting the gas chamber

In the film's penultimate sequence, while Tadeusz is busily engaged in a grand ceremony for the SS, pretending to play the tuba, it is the cinematic spectator – without the protagonist – who witnesses mass murder in the gas chamber in a scene that is cross-cut with the macabre and bizarre celebrations. Tadeusz is absent from the gas chamber scene, therefore it is not the protagonist that the spectator identifies with as much as the film's body. Watching this sequence is a particularly visceral experience because it invites the spectator to engage with a filmic body that appears unable to cope with this historical scene. While clichés commonly found in representations of the gas chamber on screen, such as the spy hole, are included, they are disrupted by reminders of the presence of the film's body, thus the spectator is abruptly shifted from identification with diegesis and characters to a conscious identification with the film body.

Debates about the representability of the gas chamber on screen have been at the forefront of Holocaust discourse. Saxton particularly highlights the dispute between Jean-Luc Godard and Lanzmann. She notes that both filmmakers “see conventional forms of representation as unable to bear witness to the horror of the camps,” yet offer radically different responses to this dilemma.<sup>36</sup> The former, considering cinema as having failed to film the Holocaust, searches for a redemptive quality in the medium and believes that if a mythic image of the gas chambers (the so-called *pellicule maudite* – the “confounded reel”) exists, then it should be shown. The latter, voraciously against using the Holocaust archive, claims he would destroy such an image if it was found.<sup>37</sup> Such disparate thoughts about this scene highlight its ethical complexity and thus the challenges it offers to Holocaust memory – challenges that have transcultural significance.

In *Kornblumenblau*, when the victims are herded into the gas chamber the shot is framed from the other side of a fence. The camera moves from left to right, as the people move right to left. The effect of these contrasting movements appears to slow down the image as fragments of it are caught in the gaps of the fence, like single frames of the film or images of a zoetrope. This effect gives the sensation that the spectator is staring at the physical, material film rather than a seamless diegesis. However, there is a quick cut to a realist composition of women in long-shot walking into the gas chamber, which pulls the spectator back into the film world. A tension emerges between the presence of the film body and the diegesis it is trying to express. Mimetically the spectator can empathize with the film's corporeal destruction as they also struggle to relate to the experience of the characters, for death in



the gas chamber is an experience one can never fully understand corporeally (or arguably intellectually).

The film begins to reveal its fragility, divulging its illusionary status as a moving image; it starts to break down as it confronts this scene, yet abruptly switches back to a more realist style recognizing a responsibility to bear witness to it (which can also be interpreted as “to remember” in the context of Holocaust memory). As the gaps in the fence are successively replaced by the dark space of its panels, we are reminded of what Barker calls:

[t]he phenomenological ambivalence between stillness and motion ... [that] defines the very nature of cinema, where the tension is experienced and expressed viscerally through what Andrei Tarkovsky described as the “time that pulsates through the blood vessels of the film.”<sup>38</sup>

Barker is quick to remind us that this pull between stillness and motion, and wholeness and fragments, is not unique to film but is also phenomenologically inherent to the human body. She explains that the “fits and starts” that define cinema's 24 frames per second are similar to the intermittences in the human interior that allow it to function – the flow of the blood in the heart, the breath in and then out.<sup>39</sup> Thus Barker recognizes that the film's corporeal wholeness is illusionary: it usually hides from us the mechanical fragments that allow it to move through time and space, just as humans don't reveal every tiny movement that happens inside their bodies to others. When the film body reveals the fragility of its viscera in a sequence such as *Kornblumenblau's* gas chamber scene, it encourages the spectator to recognize their own corporeal vulnerability as they mimetically engage with the film.

When the gas chamber appears, seemingly from the SS officer's point of view, the spectator is once again reminded of the film's presence as borders on the screen appear to divide the image into four framed areas. Frames are commonly used to express voyeurism in the film: Tadeusz watches two men speaking about escape plans through a door frame; sees the Jewish ballerina through the open doors of the cattle cart on which she arrived; and watches an execution through a window in the kitchen store room. However, in the film's climax, the distinct frame lines do not serve to help the spectator see anything clearly; rather they disrupt the aesthetic of the image, making it difficult to distinguish action.

Thus, the sequence throws any potential reliability of the film's previous frames into question, which implicitly emphasizes the unreliability of a vision-centric and hegemonic comprehension of the past. In fact, the dominance of the darkness left by the framing disrupts the image, making it more abstract. The inclusion of four separate frames in the image reminds the spectator that celluloid is composed of several micro-elements, foregrounding the materiality of the film. When people enter the gas chamber, beyond the fence, we identify with the temporality and spatiality of frames as the film appears to emphasize

its frame-by-frame movement; during the victim's suffering, with the physical borders of frames, and in the sequence's finale we see the most simplistic element of film: the single, still, aestheticized filmic frame.

When the door is opened and the bodies revealed, their organization is clearly constructed – it could be construed to symbolize a human skull. This shot is heavily aestheticized, drawing the spectator's attention to its existence as image. The camera is still and two Sonderkommando open the door slowly as if releasing theatre curtains before they stand in the darkness at the edge of the frame they have created. The fleshy death mask constructed from several corpses is perfectly centered in the frame for the audience to appreciate as image. Stillness haunts the frame, momentarily allowing the audience to survey the devastation. Despite the harrowing features of the image, the camera lingers on it and the stillness of the frame encourages the spectator to fully digest everything they see on screen. Both the content of the image – the strange skull-like construction composed of human bodies – and the film body's unusual display of intentionality – characterized by stillness which draws attention to the existence of the single frames of which the film is constructed – draw attention to a corporeal foreignness about this scene. It feels strange in both human and filmic bodily terms. From a perceived slowing down of the film's moving image to the revelation of the frame borders and finally to the individual framed image, the film presents a fragile breaking down as it confronts the gas chamber. As the sequence progresses, the film negates any illusion of continuous filmic movement, and reveals its vulnerability and its inability to confront this past without reflecting on its own material fragility.

It is also significant that the diegetic human forms move in more abstract ways as the scene progresses. Firstly, they run into the gas chamber and we see their physical human form, then they perform choreographed awkward movements across the screen as the camera glimpses only segments of their bodies in the chaotic space of the gas chamber. Finally, they appear as a collective skull-like image – no longer recognizable as individual human bodies, but as one aesthetic mass. Normative bodily expression, by both the film and diegetic human bodies, is challenged in this sequence. The gas chamber as a historic scene is not only difficult to comprehend linguistically but is impossible to know sensually. Thus *Kornblumenblau* materially shuts down as it attempts to confront this image from the past that it can never fully recall. The spectator is invited to engage with this mimetically and to appreciate their own corporeal vulnerability and their inability to fully know this traumatic scene. This is one moment in *Kornblumenblau* in which the Polish narrative is sidelined (Tadeusz pretending to play in the orchestra is intercut with this sequence, but for relatively brief moments). In the film's climax, the foregrounding of corporeal breaking down draws attention to shared transcultural experiences with Holocaust memory: a problem all encounter when confronted with this past – what did it mean to experience death in the gas chamber? Thus, how should it be remembered?

## Conclusion

Many elements of *Kornblumenblau* foreground a specifically Polish memory of the Holocaust, so it would be tempting to focus solely on the film's national context. However, turning toward the relationship between spectator and film reveals its transcultural significance. *Kornblumenblau* encourages the spectator to challenge the singularity of official histories and to consider the Holocaust a complex event characterized by a multiplicity of memories, many of which are often suppressed. Furthermore, the film provokes an embodied rather than solely intellectual engagement with the past, and thus opens up the potential for not only different memories to be appreciated, but also different ways of thinking and feeling about the past. These issues are particularly foregrounded by the haptic resonance of the opening pseudo-archival sequence.

Furthermore, color and aural overlays that disrupt the verisimilitude throughout the film draw attention to the corporeal difficulties one has in confronting the space of the concentration (and death) camps – a repulsion toward such violation of the body. In the climax, the spectator is encouraged to mimetically engage with the film body's difficult confrontation with the gas chamber: an image neither film nor spectator has or could ever witness first-hand and survive to remember. The sequence challenges mythic depictions of this scene, encouraging the spectator to relate to the experiential distance between their lived-world and this particularly challenging moment of the past. All of these sensations are knowable across cultures and different bodies.

*Kornblumenblau* is thus not only a film of national significance, but of transcultural import too. While this focused study of one particular Holocaust film cannot speak for every screen interpretation of this past, I hope to have evidenced the potential the medium has to engage the spectator not only with the Holocaust as a real event that happened or its memory as defined on national terms, but with the complex transcultural dimensions of memory of this traumatic past. Turning attention to the topography of the spectatorial space, reading it phenomenologically, and identifying it as characterized by the meeting of film and spectatorial bodies, reveals the significance of the relationship between film and spectator, and enables analysis of the affect Holocaust films may provoke for the spectator: a grossly understudied yet incredibly important issue. To fully appreciate the potential significance of film to Holocaust memory, more detailed studies of the relationship between film and spectator are necessary, rather than continuing to solely focus on such films' national or representational value. The Holocaust continues to have transcultural resonance and film is one particularly affective medium through which we can engage with this. *Kornblumenblau* may be a Polish film in terms

of its production context and several of its dominant themes, but it has the ability to speak to audiences beyond the nation's borders and to engage them with issues related to remembering the Holocaust. Such a transcultural transmission is meaningful and powerful. It is a shame then that the film has had such a limited release beyond Poland.

## Notes

1. For examples of works that focus on film's role in constructing national memories of the Holocaust, see Doneson, *The Holocaust in American Film*; Haltof, *Polish Film and the Holocaust*; Litchner, *Film and the Shoah*; and Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust*.
2. One can take Schindler's List tours of Kraków, and several years after the film's release, Oscar Schindler's former factory was transformed into the exhibition "Kraków under Nazi Occupation 1939–1945." Furthermore, beyond Poland, Spielberg's film has had a phenomenal effect on international Holocaust memory as the profits were used to establish the USC Shoah Foundation, which has recorded more than 50,000 survivor testimonies.
3. Soja, *Thirdspace*; Lefebvre, *Production of Space*; Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*.
4. Marks, *Skin of the Film*; Barker, *The Tactile Eye*.
5. I use the word "transcultural" here to expand beyond the transnational as only relating to crossing borders between states (an issue I will discuss further later in this article).
6. Levy and Sznajder, "Memory Unbound."
7. Ibid., 87–8.
8. Ibid.
9. Glajar, "Introduction."
10. Sobchack, "The Active Eye," 22.
11. For further discussions about non-anthropomorphic approaches to thinking about being, see Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, and Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*.
12. Tyminski, *To Calm My Dreams*.
13. Błonski, "The Poor Poles."
14. Haltof, *Polish Film and the Holocaust*, 138–86.

15. King Kazimierz “the Great” was considered friendly to the Jews, and created Kraków's Jewish quarter, which was named after him. However from the mid-1400s, Jews moved to Kazimierz en masse after being expelled from cities, and it was later destroyed by the Nazis.

16. Borowski, *This Way to the Gas Chambers*; Haltof, *Polish Film and the Holocaust*, 162.

17. The many dimensions of this complex debate are outside the remit of this article, but are explored further in Błonski, “The Poor Poles”; Santorski and Wydawnicza, *Difficult Questions*; Engelking, “Murdering and Denouncing Jews”; Frommer, “Postscript”; Gross, “Holocaust in Occupied Poland”; Piotrowski, *Poland's Holocaust*; Żbikowski, “Night Guard”; and Zimmerman, *Contested Memories*.

18. Fictional films such as *Korczak* (Poland, Germany and UK, 1990), *The End of Our World* (*koniec naszego świata*, Poland, 1964), and *According to the Decrees of Providence* (*Wedle wyroków twoich*, Poland and West Germany, 1984) use archive imagery to authenticate their relationship to history, while several documentaries interrogate the relationship between photography and memory, including *Photographer* (*Fotoamator*, Poland, France and Germany, 1998) and *I Am Looking at Your Photograph* (*patrzę na twoją fotografię*, Poland, 1979).

19. Marianne Hirsch particularly explicates this idea that later witnesses (or in her words “postmemory” generations) can only access the Holocaust through mediated forms, in *Generation of Postmemory*, 33.

20. De Cesari and Rigney, “Introduction,” 3.

21. For an example of such an approach, see Ezra and Rowden, “General Introduction.”

22. hooks, *The Oppositional Gaze*.

23. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*.

24. Marks, *Skin of the Film*, 153.

25. Ibid., 162.

26. Marks, *Sensuous Theory*.

27. Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 151. One can see, in Barker's terms, the limitations human scholars have in attempting to think in non-anthropomorphic ways about the world when the language we have available to discuss corporeality is so reliant on features of the human body.

28. Marks, *Skin of the Film*, 194.

29. While it might seem a far stretch to suppose one should turn to what is not shown in footage, Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust*, reveals the insightfulness of such an approach in his reading of the Jewish Holocaust in Soviet films, many of which avoid or suppress Jewishness.
30. Marks, *Skin of the Film*, 40–41.
31. Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 2.
32. Ibid., 7.
33. This distinction between “now” and “then” through color and black-and-white can be seen in *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard*, France, 1955), *Schindler's List* (USA, 1993) and the recent *Auschwitz-Birkenau: The Place Where You Are Standing* photography album published by the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Memorial Museum.
34. For examples of writing that relates color to film realism, see Kalmus, “Colour Consciousness,” 24; Barsam and Monahan, *Looking at Movies*, 211.
35. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2–3.
36. Saxton, *Haunted Images*, 48.
37. Ibid., 48–52.
38. Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 122.
39. Ibid., 128.